

Lincoln

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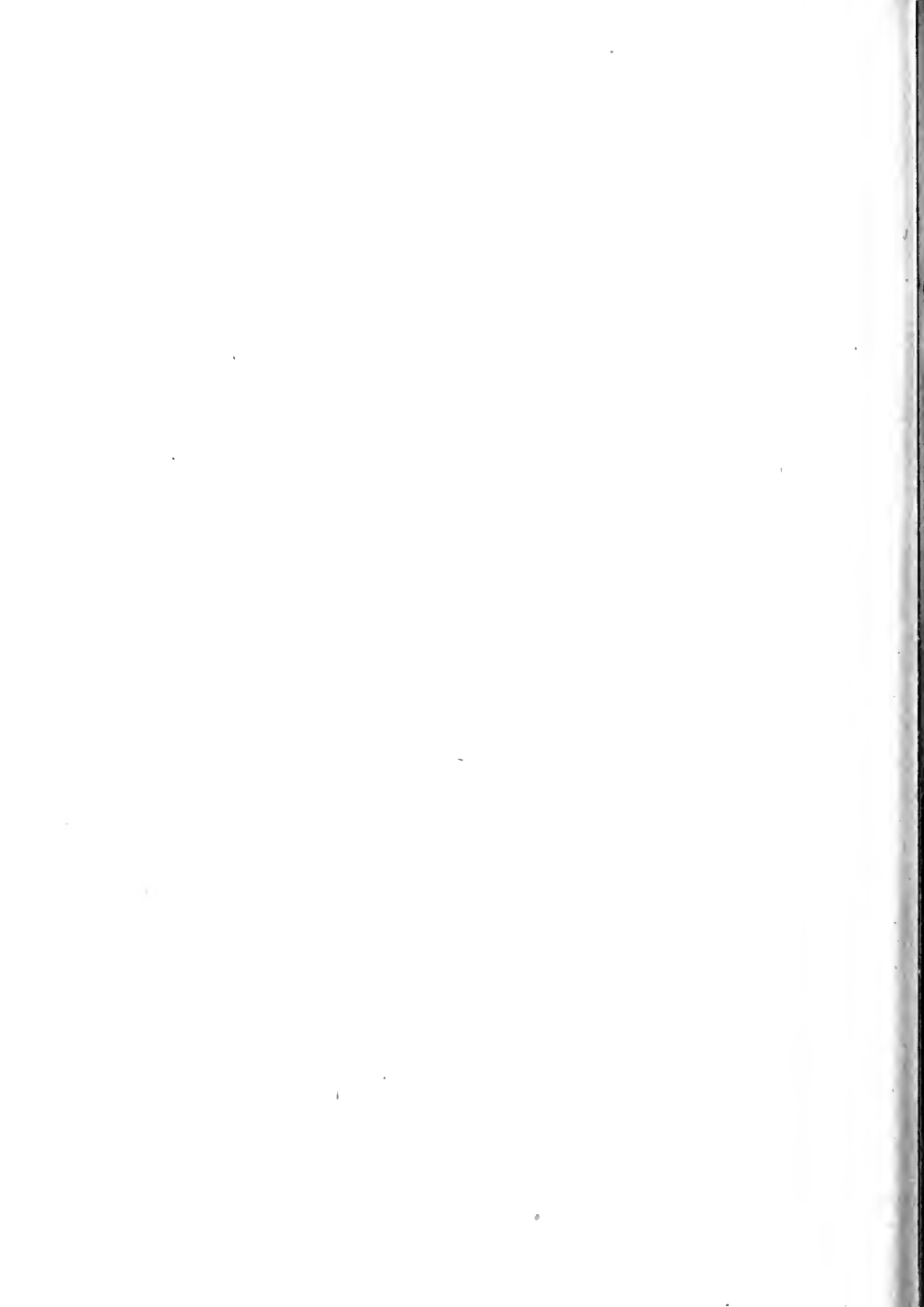


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Lessons from the Life of Lincoln

AN ADDRESS

DELIVERED IN THE

CITY OF NEW YORK ON FEBRUARY 12, 1909,
ON INVITATION OF THE BOARD OF
EDUCATION

BY

ISAAC FRANKLIN RUSSELL, LL.D.

Professor of Law in New York University

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Lessons from the Life of Lincoln

LINCOLN has passed into history. His apotheosis has been accomplished. He is numbered among the immortals. He is one of the few among the sons of earth on whose name the poppy of oblivion can never scatter its dust. His true place is not only in the Hall of Fame, built to commemorate the glory of his countrymen, but high up in the Pantheon of Humanity. Let me paraphrase the language of another: "It matters very little what particular spot may have been the birthplace of such a man as Lincoln. No people can claim him, no country can appropriate him; the boon of Providence to the human race, his fame is eternity, his residence creation." This was the language of Sir Charles Phillips and was spoken of Washington. Phillips is not with us to-night and I use his words to express my own tribute to Lincoln.

Gladstone once said that if he were taken into some grand gallery where heroic figures of the world's great men, soldiers, statesmen, patriots, and philanthropists stood on lofty pedestals, and lo there was one pedestal loftier by far than any other in the collection and no statue yet stood thereon, and he were asked, out of all the long list of the world's great and greatest, to name the man whose figure,

more colossal than any other, should adorn that highest place, he would not hesitate one moment to name the man George Washington. This may be true and just. Here, at least, at the Lincoln Centenary Celebration we'll never tear the purple from his shoulder.

Lincoln believed in the plain people and was one of them. He was no doctrinarian or dreamer, but an adroit politician and consistent spoilsman. A man from Chicago once called at the White House and asked the President to appoint him postmaster. Lincoln could not, he felt, remove the officer then in service; but, wishing to do what he could, he looked over a list of vacant places then before him, and, finding one which carried the same salary as the postmastership, boldly wrote down the applicant's name, and then looked further and noticed that the place was that of Secretary of Legation at the Court of St. James's. This appointment was unexpected and unsolicited, and eventually proved very annoying to Mr. Charles Francis Adams, our Minister, who found the appointee wholly ignorant of international law.

Lincoln introduced into his cabinet his most powerful rivals for the Presidential nomination; and later appointed Chase to be head of the Supreme Court in order to remove him as a factor in the canvass for the chief magistracy.

Lincoln was not nominated as an unknown man—what we now call a “dark horse.” He had served in Congress, and had twice been a candidate for

the United States Senatorship in Illinois. He made a strong bid for the Presidential nomination and had stumped the Eastern States before the national convention in the interest of his candidacy, and had secured wide recognition as one of the ablest orators in the land.

He believed in himself and eagerly sought the highest office. Napoleon no more desperately followed the star of his destiny, than Lincoln believed in his own divine call to the service of his country in a task which he reckoned to be greater than Washington's and which we now recognize as such.

He was powerless to control events; but events controlled him, and he felt that he was an instrument in the hands of God in one of the greatest revolutions in human history. He lived among epoch-making scenes, where justice was receiving a new definition, written by the sword; and liberty, freedom and equality were being expounded not only in the Senate and the forum, but on the field of arms. In the presence of slavery the Declaration of Independence had become a lie, and our statesmen a band of hypocrites. It cost blood and treasure for four long years for us to prove our faith in the eternal principles which our fathers professed in 1776.

Poetry, eloquence, and art will proclaim Lincoln as the great emancipator of four million slaves. As such he will always be remembered. But, in truth, he never was an abolitionist of the type of Wendell Phillips and William Lloyd Garrison. His para-

mount object was to save the Union and be a faithful exponent of the popular will.

The constitutionality of the Emancipation Proclamation was bitterly disputed. It was justified as a war measure. Lincoln at one time doubted its usefulness. It could have no operation save in those sections which were held by the enemy in armed rebellion. It had no effect in the border States and elsewhere in loyal territory where the Union arms were triumphant. By its very terms its application was restricted to localities where its enforcement was impossible. Lincoln had compared the proclamation to the "Pope's Bull against the Comet."

He told the story of a boy who was asked how many legs a dog had, calling a tail a leg. The boy promptly answered, "Five," only to be rebuked by the warning that calling a tail a leg did not make it a leg.

It is not true, as we often hear, that Lincoln consulted with no member of his cabinet about this Proclamation. He stated seriously that he had promised God he would issue it. Nor is it wholly in Lincoln's own words. Chase had urged that there should be some reference to Deity in such a document, likely to have high historic rank, and at the request of the President penned the concluding words: "And upon this act, sincerely believed to be an act of justice warranted by the Constitution upon military necessity, I invoke the considerate judgment of mankind and the gracious favor of Almighty God."

Lincoln felt that traditional views of the Constitution should not hinder the work which he had been called upon to do and finish, namely, to preserve the Union and extirpate slavery. A constitutional amendment abolishing slavery was needed, and Lincoln secured its adoption by the requisite vote of three-quarters of the States. The conventions which ratified the war amendments were turbulent and disorderly, and some of them were no more representative bodies than was the Rump Parliament of Cromwell. Just one more State was needed to carry out this patriotic purpose and it was found on the map in Nevada, then as now a mere mining camp, unequal to the burdens of Statehood, and later disgraced by the sale of Senatorships to bonanza kings and a welcome to prize-fighters who had been exiled from other law-abiding commonwealths. But the glory of Nevada's initial work obscures the infamy of these later days and makes us hail her with pride as a member of the Union and welcome her warmly to the blue field of the flag and the bright constellation there.

Lincoln's rank as a popular orator is the highest in the annals of American eloquence. His second inaugural address and his oration on the battlefield of Gettysburg reach the sublimest elevation of human speech. He was not the only Northern leader who had moral earnestness and eloquence, and the spirit of a hero and martyr. Charles Sumner had all these in large measure. But Sumner's rhetoric,

like Edward Everett's, was classic, scholarly and pedantic. It had the flavor of the university and the library, instead of the odor of the mountains, the plains, the market-places and the haunts of the humbler sons of the Republic. Lincoln spoke the simple language of the poor, without affectation, pedantry, classic embellishment, or platitudinous ponderosity. And to this divine art of speech he owed the opportunity of his life. It enabled him to win verdicts from the jury in a time when he was an acknowledged leader of the bar of his State; for he represented the Illinois Central Railway, and had cases on the calendar in almost every county, riding around the circuit in accordance with the practice in his day. It made him bold to cross swords in a duel of words with Judge Douglas, the most illustrious orator of his age, and win a national reputation as a master of debate.

The following is the concluding paragraph of the first inaugural: "I am loath to close. We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic cords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature."

"The oration at Gettysburg," says Boutwell, "ranks with the noblest productions of antiquity, with the works of Pericles, of Demosthenes, of

Cicero; and rivals the finest passages of Grattan, Burke or Webster."

The following is a letter to Mrs. Bixby, of Boston:

Nov. 21, 1864.

"Dear Madam:—I am shown, in the files of the War Department, a statement of the Adjutant-General of Massachusetts, that you are the mother of five sons who have died gloriously on the field of battle. I feel how weak and fruitless must be any words of mine which would attempt to beguile you from a loss so overwhelming. But I cannot refrain, from tendering to you the consolation that may be found in the thanks of the Republic they died to save. I pray that our Heavenly Father may assuage the anguish of your bereavement, and leave you only the cherished memory of the loved and lost, and the solemn pride that must be yours to have laid so costly a sacrifice upon the altar of freedom.

"Yours very sincerely and respectfully,

"ABRAHAM LINCOLN."

The anecdotes that Lincoln told were mostly humorous; and often, from our present standards, coarse. He resorted to humor quite philosophically, as throwing a bright light on the field of vision, illustrating by sharp incongruities the pathway of wisdom and discretion. He knew its value, too, as a safety-valve to the mind, giving

relief from the crushing burden of serious reflection and distracting meditation.

The following anecdotes, told by Lincoln, may serve as types:

Three men had persistently bothered him with applications for office. They called at the White House every day for a week. Finally he told them the story of a Sunday School boy who was asked to give an account of the Hebrew children in the fiery furnace, and got on very well till he reached the names of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, names that were hard for him to pronounce, when he blurted out: "Here come those three infernal bores; I wish the devil had them."

Lincoln wrote as follows to a correspondent who had urged a candidate for office on the President: "I saw your friend, and, as I haven't much influence with the administration, I sent him to Chase, who told him to go to the devil; the fellow came straight back to me."

A brigadier-general and twelve army mules had been captured in a rebel raid. Colfax brought the sad news to Lincoln, who said: "How unfortunate! I can fill the general's place in five minutes, but those mules cost \$200 apiece."

When Lincoln was in the Illinois Legislature he was put forward by the Republicans to answer an elaborate attack made by the Democratic leader on one of his pet measures on the ground that it was unconstitutional. "Unconstitutional!" said Lincoln, "The gentleman's argument reminds me of a story.

One of my neighbors down on the Sangamon River got up early one morning, and, looking out of the window, saw, as he thought, a coon up a tree. He called on his son Ben to bring a gun, and taking a good aim, asked Ben if he, too, saw the coon in the tree. Ben, however, answered the old man and said: 'Say, dad, that ain't no coon, that's a sty on your eyelid.' "

The real grandeur of Lincoln's character was in his moral earnestness and entire devotion to duty. He had the heart of a child, and was continually impairing the efficiency of the army by reprieves and pardons, wrung from him by the tears and prayers of the mothers, wives, and sweethearts of soldiers who had incurred military discipline. The colored people idolized him and called their children by his name.

To-night we celebrate the incomparable services and resplendent patriotism of Abraham Lincoln. A mass of myth is fast obscuring the true and simple story of what he did. Popular legend, filling in the gaps of history, has told of his frontier life and of his ups and downs as a flat-boatman and rail-splitter. Partisan zeal discovered and exhibited the very rails that he is said to have split; but the true muse of history finds his own assertion that he never split a rail in his life.

John Conness, United States Senator from California from 1863-69, and who died in Boston last month, writes in the *North American Review* as follows:

"Mr. Lincoln told the writer that he never split a rail, and he described his confusion when, after his nomination for President, the people came to congratulate him, bringing on their shoulders the rails he had split. What should he do about it? It was not true, and his impulse was then and there to correct it; but here were masses of men, taking their own means of expressing their joy at the event of his nomination. Should he dampen the ardor of his supporters on the threshold of a campaign, or let it go on, and treat it as a means or incident in our elections? He concluded to let it pass. The loose tradition has now passed into the realm of accepted facts."

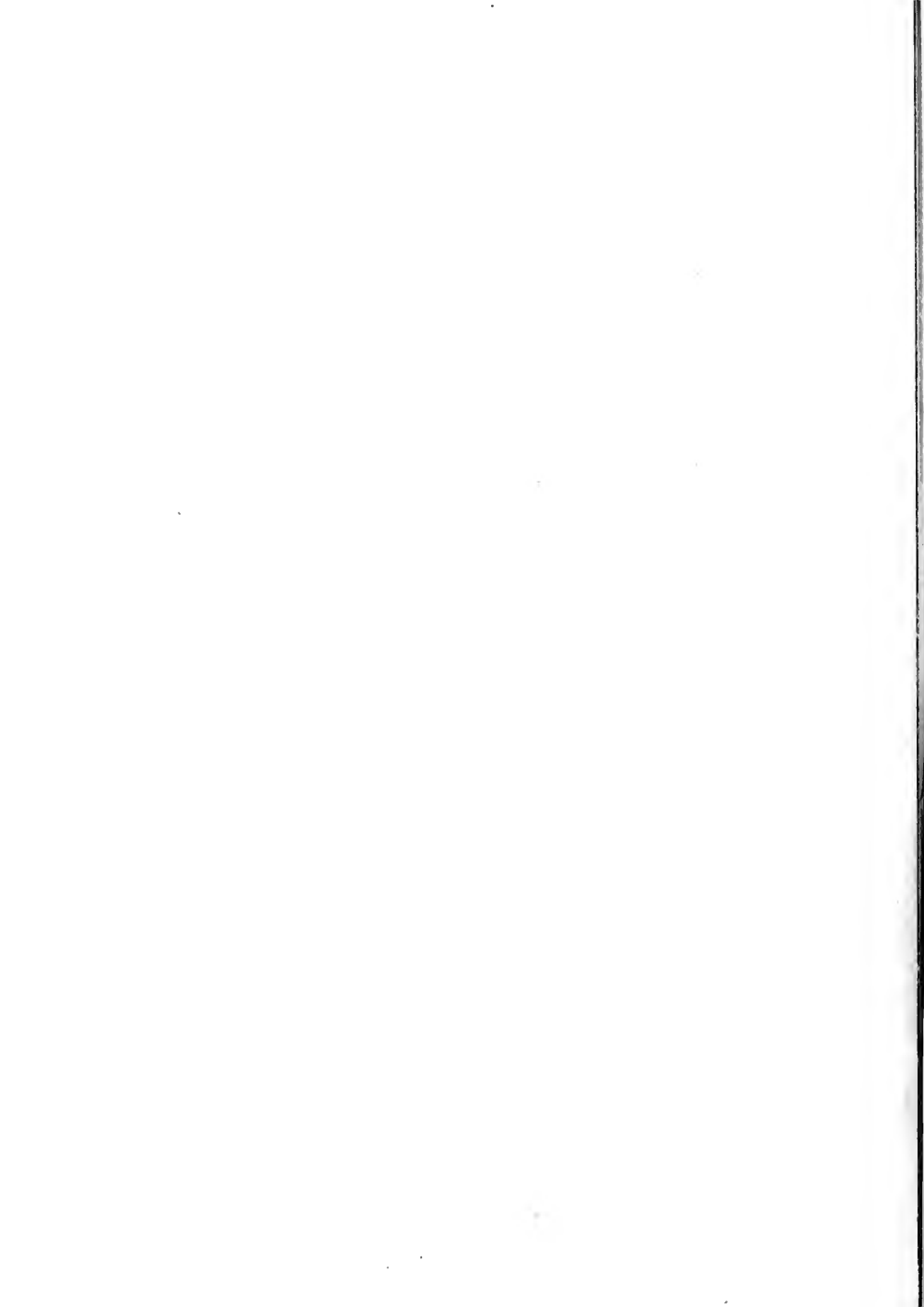
Lincoln was a son of the common people. His origin was humble, his fortune was long in coming, his poverty was sharp, and his schooling was limited to twelve months. No family was ennobled by his achievements; no university was honored by his record of glory; no church, with narrow walls and narrower creed, claims him in the fellowship of her blind votaries. His human frailties are forgotten in the memory of his martyrdom; and to-night we gladly rehearse those heroic myths that do no harm, but only prompt us to seize great virtues and hold them fast in flesh and blood where all the young and old can see and hear and think and then go out to do great deeds.

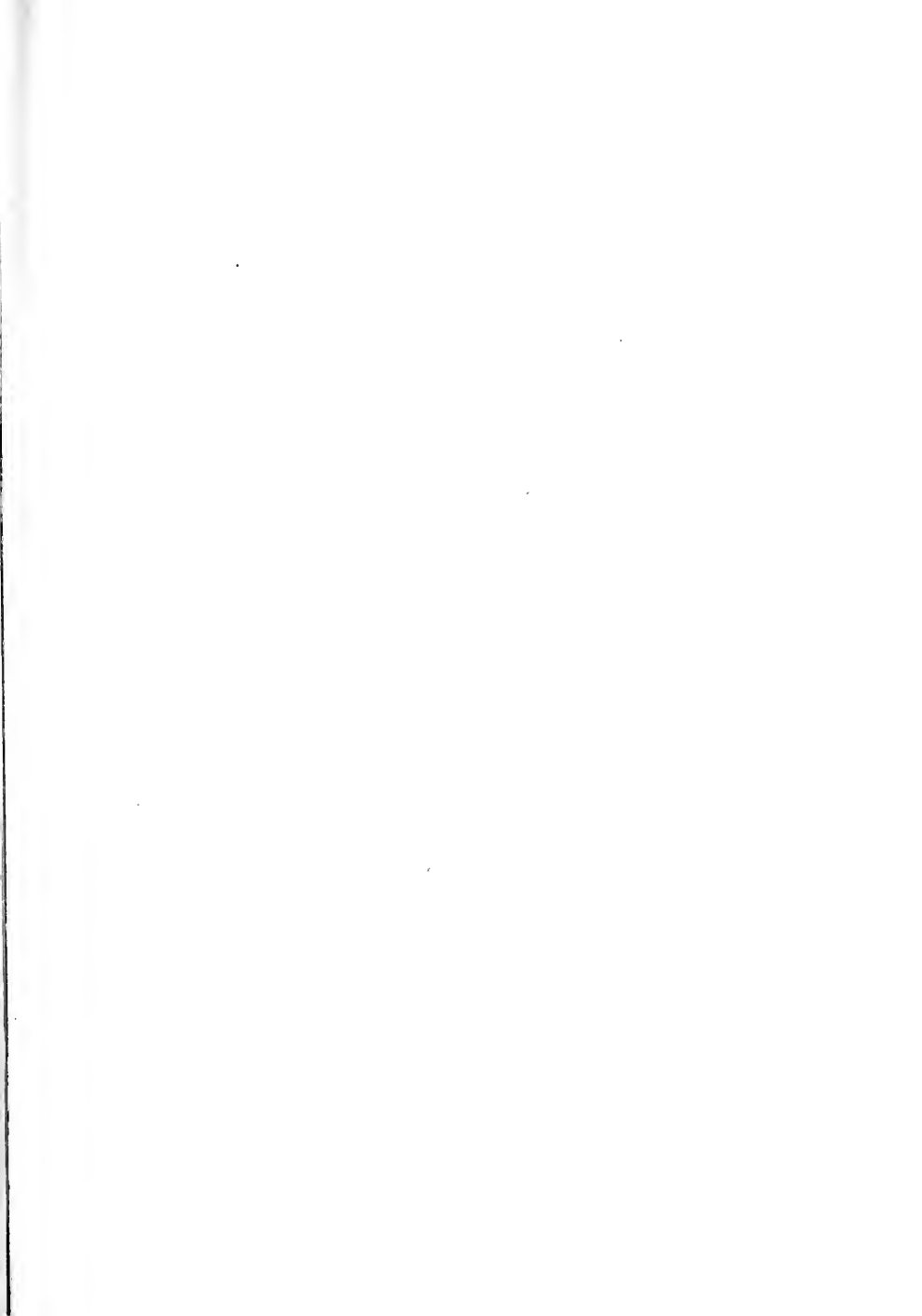
The transcendent genius of Lincoln, while the gift of God, was developed by the activities of his unique career, and displayed in scenes that can

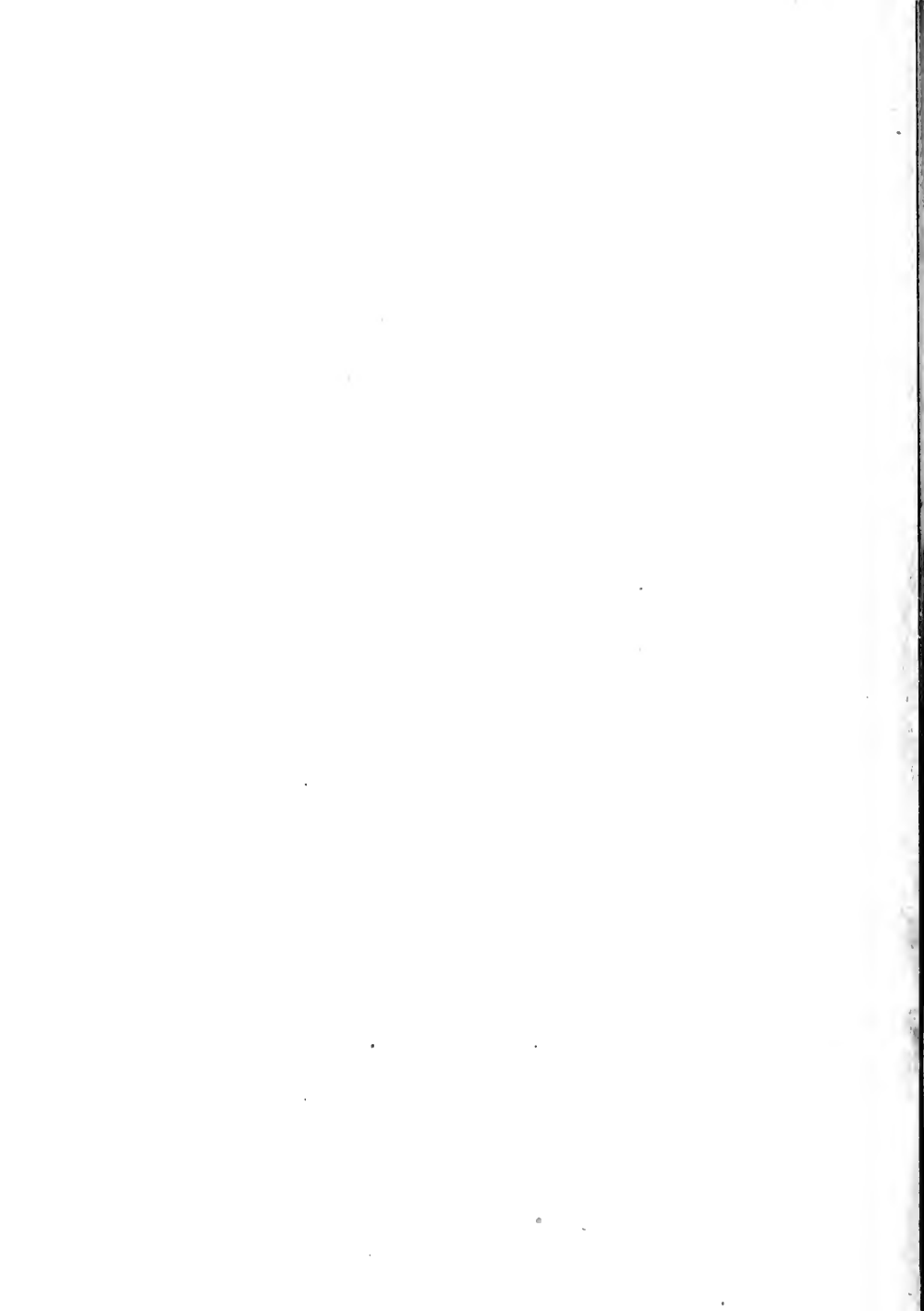
never be re-enacted in human history. A child of poverty, he reached the highest station among the sons of men. Without the culture of the schools, he found his best equipment for the most arduous of labors in the discipline of experience. His fame is imperishable while liberty lasts, and the story of his life is the most glorious page in the annals of the Republic.

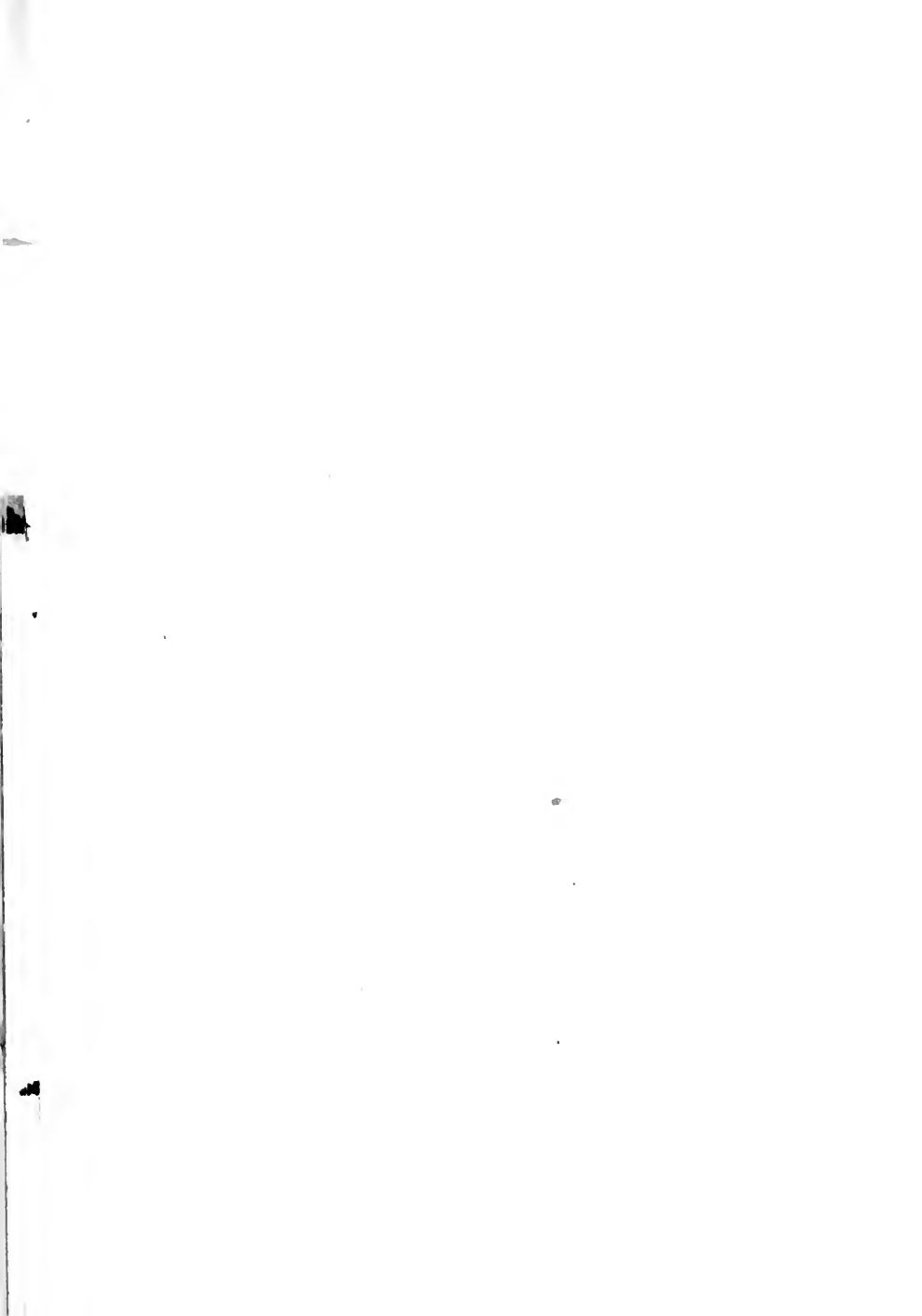
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